

## Introduction: The Drums of Our Ancestors

### Transnational Pacific Islander Americans and Social Work

#### *Dancing to the Beat of a Different Drum*

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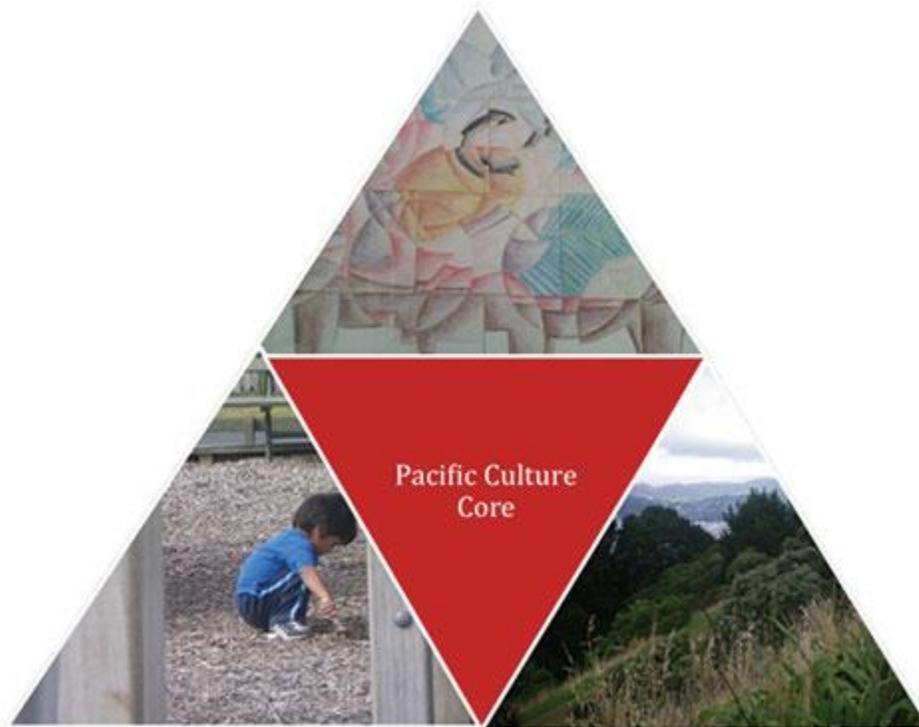
*'Epeli Hau'ofa: The Magical Metaphor Man*

We are reminded  
in the most brutal way  
that we are all connected. We are reminded  
in the most brutal way,  
that our relationship  
with the ocean is never  
on our own terms.  
We are reminded  
in the most brutal way  
why dominion over nature was never a part  
of our epistemology.  
We are reminded  
in the most brutal way  
why we know ourselves to be simply a part  
of a sacred continuum  
of sacred relationships where even  
the ocean is alive,  
where even  
the night birds feel,  
where even  
the rocks have spirit,  
where even  
the blood red waves  
know why they are red.  
We are reminded  
in the most brutal way  
the balance of life between  
is sacred, *va tapuia*,  
endlessly interconnected  
across distance, space, time, species, life, death. We are reminded  
in the most brutal way  
why long before  
Christ arrived  
on these shores  
we have always been  
a people of spirit  
a people of faith.

(—Dr. Karlo Mila-Schaaf, 2009, pp. 2–3)

Ancestors of the people of Oceania established a legacy of core values and beliefs, including spiritual strength, collectivity, inclusivity, reciprocity, and reverence for environmental and human relational gifts, as a foundation on which subsequent generations of Pacific people could

build their lives across time and space. This legacy is eloquently expressed in Mila-Schaaf's (2009) dedication to the late writer and anthropologist Epele Hau'ofa that opens this introduction, and Figure 1 provides a graphic representation of the core of Pacific culture. The drums created and passed on by the Pacific Islander ancestors to their posterity symbolize these core values and beliefs. In this book, drums are used symbolically. However, dance is also an important tradition in Pacific Islander cultures, and the principal instruments used to accompany a dance were traditionally drums. As suggested by the title of this book, social work with Pacific Islander Americans requires a different understanding and a multidimensional perspective that will empower people to thrive in their new homes.



*Figure 1. Pacific culture core: Linkage between God (top), environment (lower right), and people (lower left); source of theory concepts: Agnew et al., 2004; photo source: Vakalahi, 2010, Fulbright New Zealand).*

The indigenous heritage and identity of the people of Oceania are rich and enduring. Intergenerational links and familial and communal relationships have protected and preserved the core values and beliefs of Pacific people across time and space. Who the ancestors were and where they came from continue to captivate the imaginations of both natives and newcomers. According to legends across the Pacific, the demigod Maui fished all of the islands out of the Pacific; others have theorized origins from the southern borders of Asia (Westervelt, 1910). Thus, the journey of defining Pacific Islander identity continues.

People from Pacific nations have been grouped into the Western-constructed categories *Polynesian*, *Melanesian*, and *Micronesian*, which do not completely capture the rich history and contributions of Pacific people to the world (Hau'ofa, 1994). Contact with the Western world challenged many of these proud and powerful Pacific nations with the consequences of disease; loss of language; loss of land; and even, for some, almost total annihilation. Hau'ofa (1994) reminded Pacific people never to forget that despite these challenges and the imperial perspective that Pacific nations are only tiny islands in the sea,

Pacific nations comprise a sea of islands, and Pacific people are the offspring of the Pacific Ocean, the largest body of water in the world, which has had major implications for their economic, educational, and political power. He described the perspective of the Pacific ancestors on their world as a massive space to explore, to build their homes in, and to grow subsequent generations of seafarers (Hau'ofa, 1994). Taufe'ulungaki (2004) echoed this perspective in a call to action:

We the heirs to the spiritual kingdoms of Maui and Tangaloa (gods in Pacific mythology) need to stand up and be counted. After all, if western-derived forms of development are allowed to proceed unchallenged in the Pacific as [they largely do] today, we might not have a Pacific region either to boast about or to fight for. And Tangaloa has fished to no purpose (p. 16).

This is the charge and inheritance of Pacific people: to preserve and protect Pacific land, culture, identity, vision, and the legacy of the Pacific forebears. In response to this call to action, the process of reclaiming identities and restoring the overall health and well-being of Pacific people has begun. Nations across the Pacific, such as New Zealand, Fiji, Hawaii, and Papua New Guinea, have led the way.

In light of the growth in migration and transnational identities, Pacific Islander Americans must simultaneously preserve and protect their indigenous heritage and find balance and harmony in their transnational and transcultural experience. By virtue of being Americans, Pacific Islanders in the United States have dual or multiple cultural identities that they must grapple with during this time of global interaction and pressure toward acculturation or assimilation. Many Pacific Islander Americans continue to live according to traditional Pacific cultural values, beliefs, and practices and travel regularly to the Pacific for family and community affairs. This transnational experience has led them to evolve and modify an identity grounded in two or more locations and cultures. Understanding the transnational experience of Pacific Islander Americans has become imperative for social workers and other health professionals who seek to better identify and meet their needs and challenges.

The following sections synthesize a few general cultural elements that identify indigenous Pacific people collectively. Like the drums of their ancestors, these core cultural values, beliefs, and practices may have meaning for the transnational experience and identity of contemporary Pacific Islander Americans.

### **Core Cultural Characteristics**

Each Pacific nation is unique in terms of history, people, language, and identity; however, there are commonalities and linkages across nations in the cultural elements of spirituality, collectivity and inclusivity, and reciprocity. These commonalities may guide theoretical development, policy, practice, and research relevant to this population.

### **Spirituality**

Pacific cultures view the world holistically and collectively, emphasizing a balanced relationship among *Atua* (God), *tagata* (people), and *laufanua* (environment) (Agnew et al., 2004; Tamasese, Peteru, Waldegrave, & Bush, 2005). Spirituality is inherent in the lives of all Pacific people. The spiritual underpinnings of indigenous Pacific epistemology reinforce the sense of sacredness and connectedness to the homeland among Pacific people regardless of generation and location (Newport, 2001). The spiritual element of Pacific culture is fundamental to the endurance of these relationships and connections. Experienced through traditional Pacific cultural protocols, ceremonies, and rituals that acknowledge a higher power and often through religious commitments, spirituality is a sustaining force for the health and well-being of Pacific families and communities around the world. As the core determinant of health and well-being, a

harmonious spiritual life of a Pacific person relative to family and community produces positive healthy outcomes. Finau, Tipene-Leach, and Finau (2004) and Te Pou (2010) affirmed that health and well-being can be explained and obtained through traditional methods used by traditional spiritual healers.

In the Samoan culture, for example, the Samoan person is a relational being legitimized by sacred and interdependent relationships with people, the land, and the spirit world (Agnew et al., 2004). A Samoan person acts in ways that maintain *va fealoaloa'i*, mutual and reciprocal respect in relationships. Violating *va fealoaloa'i* insults the person, family, and ancestors. This relational perspective shapes the integrity of the Samoan self. To maximize health and well-being, the dimensions of the person, including *fa'aleagaga* (spiritual and emotional being), *fa'aletino* (physical being), and *fa'alemafau* (mental and cognitive being), must be balanced and in harmony (Agnew et al., 2004).

Similarly, the Tongan culture emphasizes interrelationships among people, the land, and the spirit world (Mafile'o, 2005). Toafa, Moata'ane, and Guthrie (1999) stressed the significance of trust as the key to traditional healing—trust in the healer, doctor, *faito'o* (traditional medicine), God, knowledge, and all that is involved. Regrettably, erosion of belief and trust in traditional healing in contemporary times has often contributed to spiritual malaise and interferes with the spiritual nourishment of the Tongan psyche. Essentially, in the Tongan culture, healing is a gift and privilege that leads to wellness, which is more than just the absence of disease and pain (Finau et al., 2004).

### **Collectivity and Inclusivity**

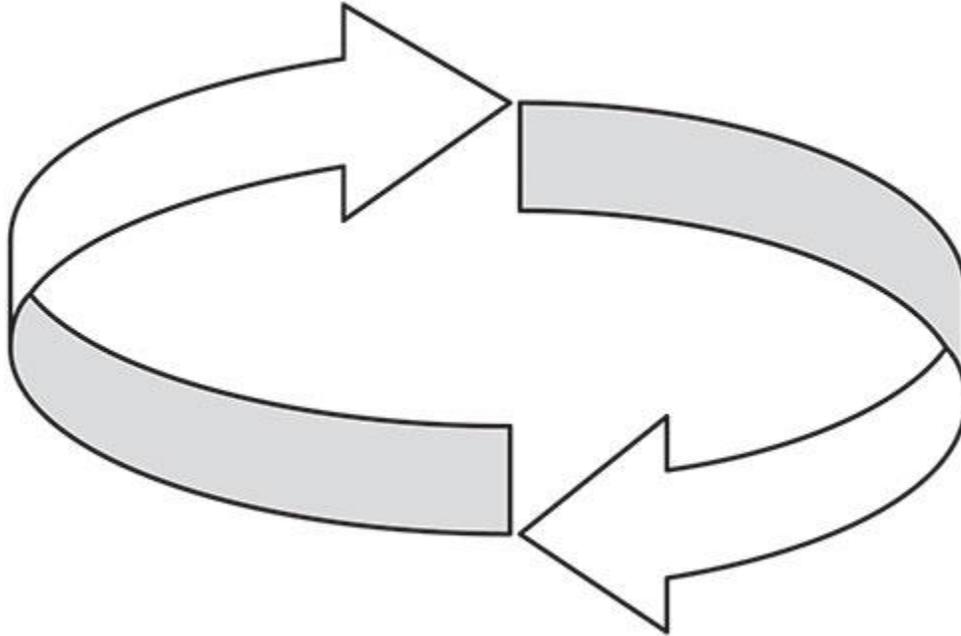
Collectivity and inclusivity are familial and communal responsibilities that are fundamental to Pacific cultural context (Afeaki, 2001; McDermott, Tsêng, & Maretzki, 1980). Even with larger societal influences and global migration, Pacific people continue to maintain and pass on indigenous cultural values, beliefs, and practices of being collective and inclusive. The collective and inclusive worldview is reflected in the practices of social support, intergenerational relationships, and community responsibility. The very relational structure of Pacific communities, which include families and relatives in intergenerational relationships and their transnational connections, have sustained the transmission of cultural knowledge from generation to generation (Gershon, 2007). Pacific children are raised and influenced by large extended families in which each generation is responsible for the subsequent generation.

In conceptualizing the collective and inclusive Pacific way of life, several models have been proposed. For instance, the *whare* or *fale* (house) is often used to symbolize a collective worldview and the centrality of family and community to health and well-being (Anae, Coxon, Mara, Wendt-Samu, & Finau, 2001; Durie, 1985). In the *Fonofale* health model, as well as in the *Fa'afaletui* model, *Whare Tapa Wha* model, and the *Pandanus Mat* model (Anae et al., 2001; Durie, 1985; Tamasese, Peteru, & Waldegrave, 1997), the roof of the *fale* represents cultural values and beliefs that are critical to healing, whereas the foundation represents the family and the *pou* (house posts) symbolize the biological, mental, and spiritual dimensions that contribute to health and well-being. The environment surrounding the house also plays a major role in contributing to health and well-being (Anae et al., 2001).

### **Reciprocity**

A central aspect of Pacific social identity is the practice of reciprocity, giving and receiving without conditions, and shared decision making and responsibility. In this collective worldview, reciprocity reflects a continuous, circular, interdependent relationship in which elements do not stand still but rather circulate to and from all elements of the world and everything in and around it. Figure 2 depicts one circle with two entities through which power, resources, wealth, and

other elements are multiplied and redefined because of the transaction that occurs during the interaction between the two entities. Elements (power, wealth, other resources) are redefined and multiplied in a different form, not in their original form, each time a transaction happens. In other words, the elements do not stand still; they move into and out of circulation.



*Figure 2. Reciprocity in the Pacific worldview: Entities (for example, person, family, community) redefine and multiply elements (power, wealth, other resources) each time a transaction happens as the elements move into and out of circulation.*

In contrast, an individualistic worldview is not consistent with a Pacific worldview and reflects a narrowly exclusive and inclusive idea of oneself as the “world.” In such a worldview, entities form separate circles that do not naturally connect or transact. Thus, power, resources, wealth, and other elements circulate only within each entity, standing still, giving only to itself. The elements remain the same and are never redefined or multiplied. If interaction does happen between the entities, the transaction is superficial and temporary.

## **Conclusion**

Among Pacific people, all dimensions of life are God given, spiritual, sacred, and worthy of being treated as sacred (Autagavaia, 2001). In responding to the needs of Pacific Islander Americans, it is crucial that practitioners consider the importance of spirituality, collectivity and inclusivity, and reciprocity. It is in the best interest of all to include the Pacific Islander American community as a partner in designing research and developing culturally relevant programs and services for this transnational population.

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